

November 8, 2009 - Murtha Blasts War Debt

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By Mike Wereschagin

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WASHINGTON — America's economy and military — one reeling from job losses, the other strained by nearly a decade at war — will soon suffer another blow when the trillion-dollar bill comes due for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Rep. John Murtha said.

"If I'm right, seven or eight years from now is when we'll start to pay with inflation," Murtha said.

The Johnstown Democrat predicted Vietnam-era inflation rates and a war debt that will sap the country's global influence for a generation. His caution was offered as President Obama considers a request from Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, for more troops.

"This will be the defining moment of this presidency," Murtha said during an interview with the Tribune-Review.

"I believe we can do it without 40,000 troops. ... I wouldn't put more combat troops in there." Murtha spoke to the Trib in the Capitol hearing room of the powerful defense appropriations subcommittee, which he chairs.

Congress has appropriated \$944 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, 75 percent of which has gone to Iraq, according to the Congressional Research Service. An additional \$128 billion is set to be spent next year.

"In the end, it's going to affect the economic influence of this country," Murtha said.

It costs \$1 billion for every 1,000-troop increase in Afghanistan, a country whose rugged geography and lack of infrastructure make it difficult to maintain supply lines, Murtha said.

"What if it doesn't work? Are you going to ask for 100,000? Are you going to ask for 200,000?" Murtha said. "We can't win it militarily."

"We have a tendency in this country to think, 'Well, we just send in more troops and that'll answer it,'" Murtha said. The Vietnam War showed that not to be true, said Murtha, who served in Vietnam as a Marine. "We had 500,000 troops. That wasn't enough. Why? Because we didn't do it right. We didn't trust the Vietnamese."

The same is true in Afghanistan, he said.

"There's no central government you can deal with that really has control," Murtha said.

Eight years into the war in Afghanistan
and six years after the Iraq

invasion, many service members have been deployed several times, sometimes for longer than a year, which puts a strain on their families, according to a 2008 report by a military psychiatrist. Murtha said unlike past wars, the burden of combat falls on an all-volunteer military and their families; and the government is waging a war without raising taxes to pay for it.

"I introduced legislation creating a surtax because I believe all of us ought to participate. I voted for a draft because I believe all of us ought to participate," Murtha said.

The war debt hasn't made as big a splash as other federal spending because it was appropriated in so-called "supplemental" spending bills, so the nearly \$1 trillion spent has not shown up on the government's accounting of its debt, said Paul Kennedy, director of International Security Studies at Yale, and author of books on the history of world powers — one of which Murtha gave to National Security Adviser James Jones.

"You can't put war costs off-budget," Kennedy said, calling the practice "an egregious abuse" of fiscal principles.

McChrystal, in a declassified version of a report to Obama in August, said a stable government will not form unless the United States demonstrates its commitment to Afghanistan. While there is doubt of that commitment, leaders there hedge their bets between U.S. and insurgent alliances, he wrote. McChrystal said the troop increase will allow the United States to demonstrate its commitment.

Obama and Democratic leaders, who accused former President George W. Bush of neglecting a necessary Afghan war for an unnecessary Iraq war, might have backed themselves into a corner by promising to add troops to the Afghan conflict.

"I told his people, that's a mistake to say that. I told (House Speaker) Nancy (Pelosi) the same thing. I said, 'Don't start saying that, because you'll wish you hadn't said it.' And I think they do wish that now," Murtha said.

Part of the problem is a lack of clear goals in Afghanistan. One high-ranking State Department official in Afghanistan, Matthew Hoh, resigned in September because he "lost understanding of and confidence in the strategic purpose of the United States' presence in Afghanistan," according to his resignation letter posted on the Washington Post's Web site.

"The president has to come up with an achievable goal," Murtha said. He's not sure what that should be, and he's seen no indication that the administration knows, either. "I asked them and they stammer around. ... I'm convinced they're struggling with an answer themselves. I don't think they've come up with an achievable goal."

McChrystal, in a declassified version of his report to Obama in August, warned, "Afghanistan could again become a base for terrorism, with obvious implications for regional stability."

Al-Qaida doesn't need Afghanistan, Murtha said.

"Al-Qaida can operate anywhere. The planning for what happened on 9/11 didn't come from Afghanistan. It came from a hotel room in the United States or Germany. It came from the country they were in," Murtha said.

The country simply can't afford to carry on a war whose goal is uncertain without risking huge inflation, he said. Recalling that mortgage rates during the Vietnam era soared to as much as 21 percent, Murtha said "that came about because we didn't pay for what we were doing — same thing we're doing now."

"I voted against every tax cut Bush had because I felt we weren't paying for that war," Murtha said.

In 2007, Murtha and Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey, D-Wis., proposed raising taxes to pay for the wars. The bill failed to pass. He and Obey plan to reintroduce a tax hike some time soon, though Murtha said it will be a symbolic gesture.

"We know it's not going to go anyplace. We're trying to send a message," Murtha said.

World War II, the country's costliest war with an inflation-adjusted price tag around \$3 trillion, resulted in great debt but, "we owed ourselves the money. Who do we owe it to now? We owe it to China. We owe it to Japan," Murtha said. "It worries me."

Mike Wereschagin can be reached at mwereschagin@tribweb.com or 412-320-7900.